FBI's image bitter issue in JFK probe

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WASHINGTON — Dallas police charges that the FBI held back information about Lee Harvey Oswald so enraged J. Edgar Hoover that he ordered the Dallas FBI to demand retraction every half hour until the police chief did so.

The former FBI director urgently dispatched an agent to Mexico City to "ex-

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plode" information about Oswald from the American ambassador there because it conflicted with FBI material and he feared the envoy might some day publicly accuse the agency of incompetence.

Even John McCone, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, was accused of "vicious and underhanded" dealings with Hoover's FBI and high bureau officials moved to confront him before he "gets any more ideas" about questioning the FBI's capabilities.

Perhaps more vividly than anything else, the picture which emerges from 40,001 pages released Wednesday from the FBI's file on President Kennedy's assassination is that of a frantic, even desperate Hoover wildly fighting off criticism of the bureau in the tumultuous days following the slaying in Dallas.

The files, part of the bureau's raw work product in the massive investigation, reveals an FBI director concerned almost to the point of paranoia about the creation of a presidential commission usurping the FBI role, as well as heavy-handed efforts to discredit those who doubted its integrity. No one — not even Robert F. Kennedy — was immune from Hoover's bitter defense of his agency.

There appeared to be little in the newly released material that would call into question the conclusion of the War-

See FBI CRITICIZED on Page 18

Highlights of FBI assassination files

- FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover seemed almost as preoccupied with protecting the FBI's image as solving and investigating the assassination.
- Hoover was certain within hours that Lee Harvey Oswald had shot President Kennedy, but he insisted to President Lyndon Johnson and aides that the possibility of conspiracy not be discounted too quickly.
- Hoover fought unsuccessfully against the formation of a special presidential commission, wanting the FBI to handle the probe exclusively.
- Both internal investigations within the Dallas Police Department and scores of FBI interviews indicated that Jack Ruby gained entrance to the police basement (where he shot Oswald Nov. 24, 1963) because of a "series of unfortunate coincidences" and was unaided.
- Hoover strongly ordered Dallas FBI agent James Hosty to be muzzled from discussing the case after a Dallas story quoted Hosty as saying the bureau knew of Oswald's "capability." Hosty was later censured and transferred.
- Hoover told his Dallas agents to "take charge" of the investigation because perhaps the Dallas police might not "handle it properly."

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ren Commission that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, killed the President on Nov. 22, 1963. Indeed, the material is a graphic illustration of a consuming investigation of the murder by the entire FBI apparatus.

But the files are replete with signs of deep anxiety at FBI headquarters when it learned within hours of the president's death that his presumed assassin was a former defector to Russia listed in the bureau's own internal security files. Oswald also was known to work in the Texas School Book Depository along the route of Kennedy's motorcade.

Hoover's worst fears that the FBI would be blamed for allowing a pro-Communist like Oswald within striking distance of Kennedy were soon realized when Police Chief Jesse Curry the morning after the assassination told reporters about the FBI knowledge of Oswald.

According to an FBI memo, Curry said the FBI had recently interviewed Oswald, that he had been under surveillance for some time and that the Dallas Police Department had never been informed of his presence in the city, despite the FBI's normal tendency to notify the police of "subversives."

"The Director was immediately advised of these allegations," the Nov. 23, 1963 memo said. "Special Agent-in-charge (J. Gordon) Shanklin was ... instructed to contact Chief Curry and set him straight regarding these allegations." Shanklin was ordered to tell Curry "to get back on television, and should also inform the wire services, immediately of the falsity of his statements."

Cartha D. DeLoach, author of the memo and one of Hoover's top lieutenants, said Shanklin immediately called Curry and convinced him to retract, but "I told Shanklin that regardless of Curry's statements if Curry did not follow through he should contact Curry again within thirty minutes."

At the time of the killing, Agent James Hosty had not interviewed Oswald, but was trying to locate him. Neither did the FBI have him under surveillance, although since his return from Russia, Oswald had been contacted infrequently by the FBI.

The Dallas police first learned of the FBI's knowledge from Hosty when he arrived at police headquarters to question Oswald — a matter of which Shanklin was either unaware or unwilling to tell his superiors in Washington.

"I asked (Shanklin) why Chief Curry would make such stupid statements," DeLoach wrote in his memo. "Shanklin stated Curry was usually very cooperative, a very good friend of the FBI, but did not think very fast and obviously made the statements without giving thought to repercussions."

Hoover's grudge against Curry was set out more explicitly in a February 5, 1964 memorandum of his conversation with then-Atty. Gen. Nicholas Katzenbach in which he complained that the FBI was being unfairly blamed for leaks to the press.

"I stated we identified (pieces of evidence) ... and the chief then went on TV and radio and reported what we found," Hoover fumed. "I stated I told (Shanklin) to tell the chief I wanted him to shut up.

"Of course, the chief could have ig-

nored me, but nevertheless, I thought he was doing a great deal of harm, but the chief did shut up and he never appeared on TV or radio again; but the harm had been done because certain members of (the Warren COmmission) thought the material was leaked out by the FBI."

Another memo written at headquarters harshly criticized Dist. Atty. Henry Wade and Dallas Police Capt. Will Fritz, the chief homicide investigator, for making "irresponsible" statements to the press almost daily about what the FBI knew of Oswald's background.

So towering was Hoover's rage at such suggestions that when he learned of Hosty's statements at the police department he fired off an urgent message demanding that Hosty be silenced.

"Tell Dallas to tell Hosty to keep his mouth shut," Hoover said in a handwritten note. "He has already done irreparable harm." Hosty and 17 other FBI agents were censured by Hoover some months later and were quietly reassigned to other field offices.

The FBI's sensitivity to the involvement of other government agencies in the assassination probe is reflected in another memo circulated from headquarters which concerned then-Texas Atty. Gen. Waggoner Carr.

Carr was conducting a state court of inquiry into the assassination and had formally requested a meeting with Hoover to discuss the FBI's findings so far. The FBI acidly noted, according to the memo, that all Carr wanted was to have his photograph taken with Hoover for his use in a political campaign the next year.

Hoover's resentment of intrusion into the FBI domain also extended to the top American diplomat in Mexico City, Ambassador Thomas Mann, who in the first week after the assassination sent the director an apparently provocative cable about Oswald's activities there.

Oswald's travels to Mexico City in late September and early October 1963, where he visited the Soviet Embassy and Cuban consulate, were discovered within days of the shooting and aroused deep fears that the accused assassin had perhaps conspired with foreign agents.

The substance of Mann's cable was not disclosed. It is known, however, the CIA had been informed by an agent of a Latin American nation that he had overheard Oswald discussing the assassination within the Cuban consulate and saw him receive $6,500 in currency.

The agent later admitted he fabricated the story when he failed a polygraph examination.

Apparently convinced the story was bogus, Hoover nevertheless decided to send an agent to Mexico City because Mann "may be one of those pseudo-investigators, a Sherlock Holmes, but he has made a lot of statements which, if true, throw an entirely different light on the whole picture."

"Regardless of what (our) report shows, with all the details given, if we haven't gone into them and exploded them, the Ambassador may some day decide to write a book and show what he notified this government of and no action was taken," Hoover wrote in the Nov. 27 memo.

A subsequent FBI memo the same day noted that Hoover "is very much concerned" about the ambassador's cable and wanted to immediately "explode or prove this situation completely."

The commission later determined that Oswald visited the Soviet and Cuban stations in an effort to obtain travel visas to Cuba and that his contact there were unrelated to any conspiracy in the president's assassination.

Perhaps the most baffling example of the FBI bunker mentality at the time concerned the bureau's relations with the CIA, an agency with which Hoover had quarreled for years but which became deeply involved in the investigation because of Oswald's foreign travels.

McCone, the CIA director, had called the top FBI official personally "to be sure I am satisfied the CIA is giving all the help they possibly can," Hoover wrote on Nov. 26, 1963. "I assured Mr. McCone we had the very best support we could possibly expect from the CIA."

But less than a month later the highest levels of FBI leadership had become convinced that McCone himself was spreading stories to newspaper columnist Drew Pearson about the FBI's failure to properly investigate the $6,500 Mexico City payoff allegation.

"John McCone has attacked the bureau in a vicious and underhanded manner characterized with sheer dishonesty," a Dec. 19, 1963, memo from assistant director D.J. Brennan said. "If the facts are true (that McCone was leaking information), we can safely assume that McCone will contunue such tactics to the point of seriously jeopardizing bureau prestige and reputation."

Noting "there is a way of putting a stop to this," the memo suggested McCone be directly confronted with the issue and strongly reminded "that the story regarding Oswald's receipt of money in Mexico City was completely discredited," as his own agency was aware.

"He will certainly know where he stands, will undoubtedly have a profound respect for our capabilities to be informed, and he certainly will bear all of this in mind in the event he gets any ideas of making similar statements in the future," the memo concluded.

There is apparently no further mention of whether FBI officials ever met with the CIA director.

While Hoover's determination to take control of the unfolding assassination investigation and vindicate the agency was apparent even from the first, the newly released files give vivid insights into the tenacity with which he sought to wrest the case away from local authorities.

In a teletype forwarded to Shanklin, the Dallas FBI head, within hours of the slaying, one of Hoover's top assistants instructed: "Be sure and not assume that the police are going to handle this properly; that we must conduct a vigorous and thorough investigation and come up with an answer."

And while the Secret Service had the primary responsibility for the president's protection and was deeply concerned about its own image, a memo from the agency's top officer, James Rowley, acknowledged within days that the FBI was "completely handling" the case.

Due primarily to the cloud cast over the FBI by the early events of the assassination many government officials were calling for establishment of an independent body of private citizens to review and evaluate the conclusions of the FBI about the slaying.

The suggestion that the FBI was incapable or was not to be trusted infuriated Hoover and the top echelon of bureau officials, and minions of agency brass were dispatched to head off such a development.

Fearful that the Washington Post was considering an editorial endorsement of the idea, DeLoach met privately with Managing Editor Al Friendly in a Byzantine effort to persuade him to withhold such an article.

"I told Friendly I had just conferred with the director regarding this matter and wanted him to know that such an editorial . . . would merely 'muddy the waters' and would create further confusion and hysteria," DeLoach reported in a Nov. 25 memo.

"I told him Mr. Hoover was personally supervising these investigations . . . I mentioned that Mr. Hoover had seen to it that the best-trained men in the FBI were on these investigations."

Friendly, according to the memo, said he had no objection to withholding the editorial as long as there was "some outstanding group . . . affirming and issuing the FBI report rather than the attorney general or that 'boob' (Waggoner Carr) who calls himself the Attorney General of Texas."

The overture ended, however, with Friendly saying he could not make a commitment for the Post. DeLoach concluded that the problem was the top editor, Russ Wiggins, "who cannot be trusted."

Yet the bureau at times appeared to question even those who supported the FBI's opposition to what eventually became the Warren Commission.

A Nov. 27 memorandum from FBI official C.A. Evan noted that presidential adviser Abe Fortas had counseled Lyndon B. Johnson against forming an independent review body. His argument was nearly identical to the FBI's: a commis-

— AP Photo

DIGGING BEGINS — Researcher goes through stack of documents among newly released FBI files on the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

sion would reflect badly on the agency and arouse even greater fears and suspicions about the assassination.

"Fortas, of course, is no friend of the bureau and there would be appear to be some obvious underhanded motive in his using us in his arguments . . . " the memo declared. Scrawled beneath was a handwritten response from an unidentified FBI reader: "Certainly something sinister here."

Hoover eventually was motivated to write a stern message even to Atty. Gen. Robert Kennedy, the slain president's brother and Hoover's nominal superior. The Dec. 17 letter showed thinly veiled contempt for Kennedy's decision to send him criticism of the bureau's handling of the case.

The item in question was a paper entitled "Seeds of Doubt: Some Questions about the President's Assassination" which had been published in a southern newspaper. It stated that no investigation by the FBI and the Dallas police "can be accepted with confidence."

"For your information," Hoover began his Dec. 17 letter to Kennedy, FBI files contained information about the paper's two authors which exposed their sympathies with groups such as the Socialist Workers Party.

"The paper entitled, 'Seeds of Doubt: Some Questions about the President's Assassination' . . . is returned herewith," Hoover said. "As you know, the results of our investigation . . . been furnished to the Commission."

After the assassination Hoover received a large number of letters from the public, many of them critical of the FBI for what some perceived as lax handling of Oswald and failure to prevent the death of the president.

The 40,001-page disclosure indicates that the FBI answered many of them, trying to defend the agency's integrity and reputation. Regardless of their contents, however, each letter was reviewed and its author checked against FBI indices to determine whether any were listed, apparently to determine his sympathies toward the bureau.

In a memo prepared for the Justice Department less than two hours after Oswald's arrest, Hoover already appeared convinced the former defector was "very probably" the man responsible for the shooting at Dealey Plaza.

"I thought very probably we had in custody the man who killed the President in Dallas," Hoover said. "Lee Harvey Oswald spent some years in Russia, although he was born in America . . . tried unsuccessfully to renounce his American citizenship, and then came back here." He added that he would put Oswald in "the category of a nut and the extremist pro-Castro crowd."

Less than three weeks later, however the FBI director was cautioning the Warren Commission against assuming that "Oswald was the only man" c

In another as-yet-unexplained matter, the files contained a heavily censored letter to Hoover from the FBI legal attache office in Bern, Switzerland, dated Nov. 26, 1963, which referred to certain communications before the assassination.

The letter, marked "very urgent," mentioned in connection with the Oswald case a Sept. 30, 1963, FBI message to the CIA concerning an individual named Richard Thomas Gibson. A second reference was to "African Revolution" and was dated Oct. 11.